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FM AMEMBASSY RIYADH  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2154  
INFO RUEHZM/GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE  
RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO IMMEDIATE 2801  
RUEHDM/AMEMBASSY DAMASCUS IMMEDIATE 5360  
RUEHDH/AMCONSUL DHAHRAN IMMEDIATE 0415  
RUEHJI/AMCONSUL JEDDAH IMMEDIATE 0525  
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC IMMEDIATE  
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE  
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC IMMEDIATE  
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE  
RUMICEA/USCINCCENT INTEL CEN MACDILL AFB FL IMMEDIATE  
RHEHAAA/WHITE HOUSE WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE

S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 RIYADH 001687

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SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 12/30/2019  
TAGS: [MASS](#) [MOPS](#) [PREL](#) [SA](#) [YM](#)  
SUBJECT: SITREP ON SAUDI MILITARY OPERATIONS AGAINST THE  
HOUTHIS, DECEMBER 30, 2009

REF: A. SANAA 2117

[1](#)B. SANAA 2279  
[1](#)C. RIYADH 1558  
[1](#)D. RIYADH 1570  
[1](#)E. RIYADH 1547  
[1](#)F. RIYADH 1621  
[1](#)G. RIYADH 1633

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Classified By: Amb. James B. Smith for reasons 1.4 (A), (B) AND (D)

#### SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) While there is no open diplomacy being conducted, it appears the Saudis and the Houthis may be seeking to disengage from their fighting. Prince Khalid's announcement on December 23 that major military operations had ended was followed by a Houthi statement that offered withdrawal from all positions on the border in return for a cessation of Saudi attacks. Saudi Land Forces have reportedly ceased offensive activities, although significant Saudi air strikes and artillery shelling have continued. It may be that the Saudis are now starting to turn the fight over to Yemeni government forces; Yemeni military sources reported today that they launched several attacks on Houthi positions on December 28 (Reuters, 12/29). End summary.

#### SHRINKING MEDIA COVERAGE

[1](#)2. (C) Reporting in national Saudi media about the Houthi fighting has decreased substantially in recent days, with news about Yemen focusing mostly on the attacks against Al-Qaida targets. Saudi media reports from the battlefield say that the Saudi military continues "clearing operations" and air strikes while insisting that these operations have not and will not cross into Yemeni territory. Houthi-sourced reports claim daily air attacks by Saudi and U.S. aircraft.

[1](#)3. (C) After Prince Khalid's 12/23 announcement of Saudi casualties and his 48-hour ultimatum for the Houthis to withdraw from Al-Jabri, the Houthis released an official statement to Al-Quds Al-Arabi. Muhammad Abd-al-Salam, official spokesman for the Houthis, said: "There is no objection to our withdrawal from the positions in Saudi Arabia on the condition that the Saudis stop the aggression

and not allow the use of their territories against us. ...  
The crux of the problem with the Saudi regime is not the  
territory or the border but because we faced Yemeni  
aggression from its territories."

¶4. (C) This possible olive branch offered by the Houthis was  
apparently not accepted by the Saudis, as the next day the  
Saudi newspaper Al-Yawm reported that Saudi tanks, heavy  
artillery and planes "pounded the stronghold of the  
infiltrators fortified in Al-Jabri inflicting heavy losses  
including the deaths of 340 infiltrators and the destruction  
of the deserted houses where the enemies were taking refuge."  
The actual number of Houthi deaths has not been confirmed,  
but both Al-Riyadh and Al-Watan reported on 12/28 that the  
village of Al-Jabri was recaptured by Saudi forces. For  
their part, the Houthis say there were 31 air strikes on  
Al-Jabri.

PRINCE KHALID'S REPUTATION:  
ANOTHER CASUALTY OF THE WAR?  
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¶5. (C) Embassy contacts in the Saudi Ministry of Defense  
suggest that the Saudi Land Forces have largely ended  
offensive actions since Dec, 23 when Prince Khalid declared  
victory and an end to the main Saudi military campaign.  
Prince Khalid's decision to stop ground operations probably  
means that the Saudi military has been able to clear the  
border area of Houthi insurgents.

¶6. (S/NF) We have also heard that Prince Khalid was pressed  
to stand down the ground forces because of King Abdullah's  
growing ire over three particular issues: 1) why it has taken  
so long to expel the ragtag Houthi fighters, 2) how there

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could be so many Saudi casualties, and 3) why the Saudi  
military has not proven more capable, given the billions  
invested in modernization over recent decades. Some military  
officers have speculated that Prince Khalid may have been  
removed from his position by the King if not for the return  
and protection of his father Prince Sultan. At minimum,  
within the Saudi leadership Prince Khalid's reputation as a  
military leader appears to have been damaged, perhaps ruling  
him out as an eventual successor to his father as Defense  
Minister.

COMMENT - FINGER-POINTING TIME APPROACHES  
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¶7. (C) For the last two months, the Saudi military has  
employed massively disproportionate force in its effort to  
repel and clear the lightly armed Houthi guerillas from the  
border area. Day and night aerial bombardment and artillery  
shelling have been the main instruments of what is  
increasingly regarded within the Saudi military as an  
embarrassingly long campaign that was poorly planned and  
executed that brought unexpectedly high Saudi casualties  
(exact number not known - officially 73 deaths), many  
apparently from friendly fire. Nonetheless, the conflict has  
been carefully spun as a heroic and successful struggle to  
protect Saudi sovereignty.

¶8. (C) During the campaign, the Saudi military turned to the  
U.S. for emergency provision of munitions, imagery and  
intelligence to assist them to operate with greater  
precision. The U.S. military responded with alacrity to the  
extent possible, primarily by flying in stocks of ammunition  
for small weapons and artillery. However, the great majority  
of Saudi requests remain bogged down in the FMS contacting  
process or in interagency reviews. Prince Khalid and several  
senior Saudi Air Force officers have complained that the U.S.  
has not rallied to support Saudi Arabia during its hour of  
greatest need. As the Saudi military services seek to divert  
blame for the poor management of the Houthi operations in the  
weeks ahead, it can be expected that such criticism of U.S.

support will continue, if not sharpen.  
SMITH